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B.C.

Doctor of the Church

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(AUTHOR UNKNOWN)

COVER ART: “*Saint Gregory of Nazianzen*,” oil on panel. Painted by Peter Paul Rubens in 1620 and 1621. The painting is in the Public Domain.* (Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, George B. Matthews Fund, 1952, inv. 1952:14). Comped version of this image was downloaded at [CorbisImages.com](https://www.corbisimages.com).



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(328 – 389)

(See Gregory of Caesarea, who writ his life in 940; Hermant, Tillemont, t. ix, Ceillier, t. vii; also the life of this saint, compiled from his works by Baronius, published by Alberici, in an appendix to the life and letters of that cardinal, in 1759, t. ii; also from his own works, and other monuments of that age.)

Saint Gregory is surnamed “The Theologian” due to his profound skill in sacred learning. He was a native of Arianzum, an obscure village in the territory of Nazianzum, a small town in Cappadocia not far from Caesarea.

His parents are both honored in the calendars of the church—his father, whose name also was Gregory, on the 1st of January and his mother, Nonna, on the 5th of August. Nonna drew down the blessing of heaven upon her family by most bountiful and continual alms-deeds, in which she knew one of the greatest advantages of riches to consist. Yet, to satisfy the obligation of justice that she owed to her children, she improved at the same time their patrimony by her prudent economy. Nonna devoted the greatest part of her time to holy prayer and her respect and attention to the least thing that regarded religion is not to be expressed. From infancy, his father was from infancy a worshipper of false gods of the sect called the Hipsistarii, due to the profession they made of adoring the Most High God. Nonna’s prayers and tears eventually obtained conversion of her husband, whose integrity in the discharge of the chief magistracy of his town and the practice of strict moral virtue prepared him for such a change. They had three children—Gorgonia, Gregory, and the youngest, Caesarius. Their middle son, Gregory, left us the most edifying detail of his humility, holy zeal, and other virtues.[1]

Gregory was the fruit of his mother’s most earnest prayer. Upon his birth, Nonna offered him to God for the service of God’s church. Gregory’s virtuous parents gave him the strongest impressions of piety in his tender age and his chief study, from infancy, was to know God by the help of pious books, the reading whereof he was very assiduous.

Having acquired grammar learning in the schools of his own country and being formed to piety by domestic examples, Gregory was sent to Caesarea, in Palestine, where the study of eloquence flourished. He pursued the same studies for some time at Alexandria and

then embarked for Athens in November. For over twenty days, the vessel was beaten by a furious storm and there was little hope for the ship or the passengers. All that time, Gregory lay upon the deck, bemoaning the danger of his soul (because he had not yet been baptized), imploring the Divine Mercy with many tears and loud groans, and frequently renewing his promise to devote himself entirely to God if he survived the danger. God was pleased to hear his prayer and the tempest ceased. The vessel arrived safe at Rhodes and soon after at Aegina, an island near Athens.

Gregory had passed through Caesarea of Cappadocia in his road to Palestine. Making some stay there to improve himself under the great masters of that city, he had contracted an acquaintance with the great Saint Basil, which he continued to cultivate while at Athens. Soon after, Saint Basil followed him to Athens.

From that time, the intimacy between these two saints became the most perfect model of holy friendship and nothing can be more tender than the epitaph that Saint Gregory composed upon his friend. Whilst they pursued their studies together, they shunned the company of those scholars who sought too much after liberty and conversed only with the diligent and virtuous. They avoided all feasting and vain entertainments and were acquainted only with two streets—one that led to the church and the other to the schools. They despised riches and accounted them as thorns. They employed their allowance to supply themselves with bare necessities for an abstemious and slender subsistence and disposed of the remainder on behalf of the poor. Envy had no place in them and sincere love made each of them esteem his companion's honor and advantage as his own. They were to each other a mutual spur to all good and, by a holy emulation, neither would be outdone by the other in fasting, prayer, or the exercise of any virtue.

In 355, Julian, afterwards emperor, came to Athens where he spent some months with Saint Basil and Saint Gregory in the study of profane literature and the Holy Scriptures. Saint Gregory then prognosticated what a mischief the empire was breeding up in that monster. He believed Julian displayed the indications of an unsettled and arrogant mind. Saint Gregory's view was reinforced by the levity of Julian's carriage, the rolling and wandering of his eyes, the fierceness of his looks, the tossing of his head, the shrugging up of his shoulders, his uneven gait, his loud and unseasonable laughter, and his rash and incoherent discourse.[2]

Saint Basil left Athens first. The progress Saint Gregory made in Athens towards eloquence, philosophy, and the sacred studies is shown by the high reputation he acquired and by the monuments he left behind him. His greatest happiness and praise, however, was that he always made the love and fear of God his principal affair, to which he referred his studies and all his endeavors.

The year after Saint Basil left Athens, Saint Gregory left Athens for Nazianzum and took Constantinople in his way. Here he found his brother, Caesarius, had arrived not long before from Alexandria, where he had accomplished himself in all the polite learning of that age and applied himself particularly to physic. The Emperor Constantius honored Caesarius with his favor and made him his chief physician. His generosity appeared in his practice of physic when, even among the rich, he worked without the inducement of either fee or reward. Caesarius was also a father to the poor, on whom he bestowed the greatest part of his income. Gregory was pursued by many to make his appearance at the bar or at least to teach rhetoric, as that would afford him the best means to display his talents and raise his fortune in the world. However, he answered that he totally devoted himself to the service of God.

The first thing Gregory did after his return to Nazianzum was to fulfill his engagement of consecrating himself entirely to God by receiving baptism at the hands of his father. He did this without reserve. “I have,” says he,[3] “given all I have to him from whom I received it and have taken him alone for my whole possession. I have consecrated to him my goods, my glory, my health, my tongue, and talents. All the fruit I have received from these advantages has been the happiness of despising them for Christ’s sake.”

From that moment never was man more dead to ambition, riches, pleasures, or reputation. He entertained no secret affection for the things of this world, but trampled under his feet all its pride and perishable goods as he found no ardor, no relish, no pleasure but in God and in heavenly things. His diet was coarse bread with salt and water.[4] He lay upon the ground and wore nothing but what was coarse and vile. He worked hard all day and spent a considerable part of the night singing the praises of God or in contemplation.[5] He contemned riches and profane eloquence on which he had bestowed so many pains, making an entire sacrifice of it to Jesus Christ. His classics and books of profane oratory he abandoned to the worms and moths.[6] He regarded the greatest honors as vain dreams that only deceive men and he dreaded the precipices down which ambition drags its inconsiderate slaves. Nothing appeared to him comparable to the life a man leads who is dead to himself and his sensual inclinations—a man who lives, as it were, out of the world and has no other conversation but with God.[7] However, for some time, Gregory took upon himself the care of his father’s household and the management of his affairs. He was afflicted with several sharp episodes of sickness—caused by his extreme austerities and continual tears, which often did not suffer him to sleep.[8] He rejoiced in his distempers because, in them, he found the best opportunities of mortification and self-denial.[9] His own immoderate laughter (which his cheerful disposition had made him subject to in his youth) was afterwards the subject of his tears. He obtained so complete a conquest over the passion of anger as to prevent all indeliberate motions of it and became totally indifferent regarding all that

was most dear to him before. His generous liberality to the poor always made him as destitute of earthly goods as the poorest and his estate was as open to all who were in necessity, as a port is to all at sea.[10] Never does there seem to have been a greater lover of retirement and silence. He lamented the excesses into which talkativeness draws men and the miserable itch that prevails in most people to become teachers of others.[11] It was his most earnest desire to disengage himself from the converse of men and the world that he might more freely enjoy that of heaven.

Accordingly, in 358, he joined Saint Basil in the solitude into which Basil had retreated—near the river Iris, in Pontus. Here, watching, fasting, prayer, studying the holy scriptures, singing psalms, and manual labor employed their whole time. As to their exposition of the divine oracles, they were guided in this not by their own lights and particular way of thinking, but, as Rufinus writes,[12] by the interpretation the ancient fathers and doctors of the church had delivered concerning them.

Gregory enjoyed this solitude just long enough to be enamored of its sweetness, soon being recalled by his father (then above eighty) to assist him in the government of his flock. To draw the greater succor from his son, he ordained Gregory priest by force and when he least expected it. This was performed in the church on some great festival—probably on Christmas Day in 361. Gregory's father knew the sentiments of his son with regard to that charge and further invincible reluctance of his son on several accounts, which was the reason of his taking this method. The saint accordingly speaks of his ordination as a kind of tyranny that he knew not how to digest well.

In these sentiments, Gregory flew into the deserts of Pontus and sought relief in the company of his dear friend, Saint Basil, by whom he had been lately importuned to return. Many censured his flight, ascribing it to pride, obstinacy, and similar motives. Gregory, reflecting at leisure on his own conduct and the punishment of the prophet Jonas for disobeying the command of God, came to a resolution to go back to Nazianzum. There, after a ten week absence, he appeared again on Easter Day and preached his first sermon on that great festival. Soon after, this was followed by another, which is extant, under the title of his apology for his flight.

In this discourse, Saint Gregory extols the unanimity of that church in faith and their mutual concord. However, towards the end of the reign of Julian, an unfortunate division happened, which is mentioned by the saint in his first invective against that apostate prince.[13] The bishop, his father, hoping to gain certain persons to the church by condescension, admitted certain writing that had been drawn up in ambiguous and artful terms by the secret favorers of Arianism. This unwary condescension of the elder Gregory gave offense to the more zealous part of his flock, especially the monks, who refused thereupon to communicate with him. Our saint discharged his duty so well in this critical affair that he united the flock with their pastor without the least concession in

favor of the error of those by whom his father had been tricked into a subscription against his intention and design, his faith being entirely pure. On the occasion of this joyful reunion, our saint pronounced an elegant discourse.[14]

Soon after the death of Julian, Gregory composed his two invective orations against that apostate. He imitated the severity that the prophets frequently made use of in their censure of wicked kings. Yet, his design was to defend the church against the pagans by unmasking the injustice, impiety, and hypocrisy of its capital persecutor.

Gregory's younger brother, Caesarius, had lived in the court of Julian and had been highly honored by Julian for his learning and skill in physic. Saint Gregory pressed Caesarius to forsake the family of the apostate prince, where he could not live without being betrayed into many temptations and snares.[15] So it happened; for Julian, after many caresses, assailed him by inveigling speeches and, at length, by a warm disputation in favor of idolatry. Caesarius answered him that he was a Christian and such he was resolved always to remain. Apprehensive of the dangers in which he lived, Caesarius soon chose to resign his post rather than to endanger his faith and good conscience. Therefore, he left the court, though the emperor endeavored earnestly to detain him.

After the miserable death of the apostate, Caesarius appeared again with distinction in the courts of Jovian and Valens. Valens made him *Comes rerum privatarum*, or treasurer of the imperial rents, an office that was a step towards higher dignities. In the discharge of this employment of Bithynia, he happened to be at Nice in the great earthquake, which swallowed up the chief part of that city in 360. The treasurer and a few others escaped through a wonderful providence by being preserved in hollow parts of the ruins.

Saint Gregory used the opportunity to urge Caesarius again to quit the world and its honors and to consecrate to God alone a life for which he was indebted to him on so many accounts.[16] Caesarius, moved by so awakening an accident, listened to Gregory's advice and resolved to renounce the world. However, upon returning home near the beginning of 368, Caesarius fell sick and died in the fervor of his sacrifice, leaving his whole estate to the poor.[17] He is named in the Roman Martyrology on the 25th of February. Saint Gregory, extolling his virtue, says that whilst Caesarius enjoyed the honors of the world he looked upon the advantage of being a Christian as the first of his dignities and the most glorious of all his titles, reckoning all the rest dross and dung. He was buried at Nazianzum, and our saint pronounced his funeral panegyric, as he also did that of his holy sister Gorgonia, who died soon after. He extolled her humility telling us of her prayers often continuing into entire nights accompanied with tears; her modesty, prudence, patience, resignation, zeal, respect for the ministers of God and for holy places;

her liberality to them and her great charity to the poor; her penance; and the extraordinary care she paid to the education of her children. He mentions as miraculous her being cured of a palsy by praying at the foot of the altar and her recovery from great wounds and bruises after falling from her chariot.

In 372, Cappadocia was divided by the emperor into two provinces. Tyana was made the capital of that which was called the second. Anthimus, bishop of that city, pretended hence to an archiepiscopal jurisdiction over the other Cappadocia. Saint Basil, the Metropolitan of Cappadocia, maintained that the civil division of the province had not infringed his jurisdiction, though afterwards, for the sake of peace, he yielded the second Cappadocia to the See of Tyana. He appointed Gregory Bishop of Sasima, a small town in that division. Gregory held out a long time but at length submitted, overcome by the authority of his father and the influence of his friend. Accordingly, he received the episcopal consecration from the hands of Saint Basil, at Caesarea, about the middle of the year 372. He then repaired to Nazianzum to await a favorable opportunity to take possession of his church of Sasima, which never happened. Anthimus, who had in his interest the new governor and was master of all the avenues and roads to that town, would by no means admit him.

Basil reproached his friend with sloth but Saint Gregory answered him that he was not disposed to fight for a church.[18] He did, however, charge himself with the government of Nazianzum under his father until his father's death, which happened the following year. Saint Gregory pronounced his father's funeral panegyric in the presence of Saint Basil and his mother, Saint Nonna, who died shortly afterwards.

Holy solitude had been the constant object of Gregory's most earnest desires and he had waited the death of his father to bury himself in it entirely. Nevertheless, yielding to the importunities of others and to the necessities of the church of Nazianzum, Gregory consented to continue his care of it until the neighboring bishops could provide it with a pastor. In 375, seeing this affair protracted and finding himself afflicted with various distempers, he left that city and withdrew to Seleucia, the metropolis of Isauria, where he continued five years.

In 379, the death of Saint Basil, was to Gregory a sensible affliction, and he then composed twelve epigrams or epitaphs to Basil's memory. Some years after (in 381 or 382), Gregory pronounced his panegyric at Caesarea.

In 378, the unhappy death of the persecuting emperor, Valens, restored peace to the church. Catholic pastors sought means to make up the breaches that heresy had made in many places. To this end, they held several assemblies and sent zealous and learned men into the provinces where the tyrant had made the greatest havoc. The church of Constantinople was in the most desolate and abandoned condition, having groaned during

forty years under the tyranny of the Arians. The few Catholics who remained there had been without a pastor and even without a church wherein to assemble for a long time. They, being well acquainted with our saint's merit, importuned him to come to their assistance. They were backed by several bishops, who hoped his learning, eloquence, and piety might restore that church to its splendor.

These united solicitations made little or no impression on Gregory, who enjoyed the pleasures of his beloved retirement at Seleucia and his thorough disengagement from the world. The solicitations had, however, at length their desired effect. His body bent with age, his head bald, his countenance extenuated with tears and austerities, his poor garb, and his extreme poverty made but a mean appearance at Constantinople. No wonder he was ill received at first in that polite and proud city. The Arians pursued him with calumnies, railleries, and insults. The prefects and governors added their persecutions to the fury of the populace, all which concurred to acquire him the glorious title of confessor.

He lodged first in the house of certain relations, where Catholics first assembled to hear him. Soon after, he converted it into a church and gave it the name of Anastasia (The Resurrection) because the Catholic faith, which in that city had been hitherto oppressed, here seemed to be raised, as it were, from the dead. Sozomen relates that this name was confirmed to it by a miraculous raising to life of a woman then with child, who was killed by falling from a gallery in it, but returned to life by the prayers of the congregation.[19] Afterwards, another circumstance confirmed the same name in this church. During the reign of Emperor Leo the Thracian (about the year 460) the body of Saint Anastasia, virgin and martyr, was brought from Sirmich to Constantinople and laid there, as recorded by Theodorus the Reader.[20] However, this church is not to be confounded with another of the same name that was in the hands of the Novatians under Constantius and Julian the Apostate.[21]

In this small church, our Nazianzen preached every day and assembled his little flock, which increased daily. The Arians and Apollinarists, joined with other sects, were not content to defame and calumniate him. They also had recourse to violence on his person. They pelted him with stones as he went along the streets and dragged him before the civil magistrates as a malefactor, charging him with tumult and sedition. However, Gregory comforted himself by reflecting that, though they were the stronger party, he had the better cause; though they possessed the churches, God was with him; if they had the populace on their side, the angels were on his to guard him.

Coming out of the deserts of Syria to Constantinople, Saint Jerome became disciple and scholar of Saint Gregory and studied the holy scripture under Gregory, events of which our great doctor gloried in his writings.

Our holy pastor, being a lover of solitude, seldom went abroad or made any visits, except those that were indispensable. Any time that was not employed in the discharge of his functions was devoted to prayer and meditation and he spent a considerable part of the night in those holy exercises. His diet continued to be herbs and a little salt with bread. His cheeks were furrowed with the tears he had shed and he daily prostrated himself before God to implore his light and mercy upon his people.

Gregory's profound learning; his faculty of forming the most noble conceptions of things; and the admirable perspicuity, elegance, and propriety with which he explained them charmed all who heard him. Catholics flocked to his discourses as men parched with thirst eagerly go to the spring to quench it. Heretics and pagans resorted to them, admiring his erudition and charmed with his eloquence. The fruits of his sermons were every-day sensible, his flock became numerous in a short time, and he purged the people of the poison that had corrupted their hearts for many years.

With blushing and confusion, Saint Gregory heard the applause and acclamations with which his discourses were received and his fear of this danger made him speak in public with a certain timidity and reluctance. He scorned to flatter the great ones and directed his discourses to explain and corroborate the Catholic faith and reform the manners of the people. He taught them that the way to salvation was not to be ever disputing about matters of religion (an abuse that was grown to a great height at that time in Constantinople) but to keep the commandments [22]; to give alms; to exercise hospitality; to visit and serve the sick; to pray, sigh, and weep; to mortify the senses; to repress anger; to watch over the tongue; and to subject the body to the spirit.

The envy of the devil and of his instruments could not bear the success of Gregory's labors. They found means to interrupt his success by inciting trouble. Maximus, a native of Alexandria, a cynic philosopher, but withal a Christian, full of the impudence and pride of that sect, came to Constantinople. Under a hypocritical exterior, Maximus disguised a heart full of envy, ambition, covetousness, and gluttony. He imposed on several and, for some time, on Saint Gregory himself, who pronounced an enlogium of this man in 379 (now extant under the title of the *Eulogium of the Philosopher Hero*). Saint Jerome assured us that instead of reading *Eulogium of the Philosopher Hero* we ought to read Maximus. This wolf in sheep's clothing, having gained one of the priests of the city and some partisans among the laity, in a clandestine manner procured himself to be ordained Bishop of Constantinople by certain Egyptian bishops who had recently arrived upon that intent.

The irregularity of this proceeding stirred up the entire world against the usurper. Pope Damasus writ to testify his affliction on that occasion and called the election null. Emperor Theodosius the Great, then at Thessalonica, rejected Maximus with indignation. Coming to Constantinople, the Emperor proposed to Demophilus, the Arian

bishop, either to receive the Nicene faith or to leave the city. Upon Maximus preferring the latter, his majesty, embracing Saint Gregory, assured him that the Catholics of Constantinople demanded him for their bishop and that their choice was most agreeable to his own desires. Within a few days after his arrival, Theodosius drove the Arians out of all the churches in the city and put the saint in possession of the Church of Saint Sophia, upon which all the other churches of the city depended. Here, the clamors of the people were so vehement that Gregory should be their bishop that all was in confusion until the saint prevailed upon them to drop the subject and join in praise and thanksgiving to the ever-blessed Trinity for restoring among them the profession of the true faith. The emperor highly commended the modesty of the saint.

However, a council was necessary to declare the see vacant and to declare the Arian Demophilus and the cynic Maximus void and null. A synod of the entire East was then meeting at Constantinople, in which Saint Meletius, Patriarch of Antioch, presided. As he was a great friend and admirer of the Nazianzen, the council considered his cause before all others; declared the election of Maximus null; and, with no regard for his tears and expostulations, established Saint Gregory Bishop of Constantinople.

Saint Meletius died during the synod therefore Saint Gregory presided over the latter sessions. To put an end to the schism between Meletius and Paulinus at Antioch, it had been agreed that the survivor should remain in sole possession of that see. Our Nazianzen urged, but the oriental bishops were unwilling to own for patriarch one whom they had opposed. They therefore took great offense at this most just and prudent remonstrance and entered into a conspiracy with his enemies against him. The saint, who had only consented to his election through the importunity of others, was most ready to relinquish his new dignity. His enemies sought to deprive him of this along with his life, upon which they made several attempts. Once, in particular, they hired a ruffian to assassinate him. However, the villain, touched with remorse, repaired to the saint with many tears, wringing his hands, beating his breast, and confessing his black attempt, which he should have put in execution had not Providence interposed. The good bishop replied, "May God forgive you. His gracious preservation obliges me freely to pardon you. Your attempt has now made you mine. One only thing I beg of you—that you forsake your heresy and sincerely give yourself to God." Some warm Catholics complained of his lenience and indulgence towards the Arians, especially those who had shown themselves violent persecutors under the former reigns.

In the meantime, the bishops of Egypt and those of Macedonia arrived at the council, though all equally in the interest of Paulinus of Antioch, and complained that Gregory's election was uncanonical, it being forbidden by the canons to transfer bishops from one see to another. Nazianzen calmly answered that those canons had lost their force by long disuse, which was most notorious in the East. They did not in the least regard his case,

for he had never taken possession of the see of Sasima and only governed that of Nazianzum as vicar under his father. However, seeing a great ferment among the prelates and people, in the assembly he cried out, "If my holding the See of Constantinople gives any disturbance, behold I am very willing, like Jonas, to be cast into the sea to appease the storm, though I did not raise it. If all followed my example, the church would enjoy an uninterrupted tranquility. I never desired this dignity. I took this charge upon me much against my will. If you think fit, I am most ready to depart and I will return to my little cottage, that you may remain here quiet and the church of God enjoy peace. I only desire that the see may be filled by a person that is capable and willing to defend the faith." [23] He thereupon left the assembly, overjoyed that he had broken his bands. Left in surprise, the bishops readily accepted his resignation.

The saint went from the council to the palace and, falling on his knees before the emperor and kissing his hand, said, "I am come, sir, to ask neither riches nor honors for myself or friends nor ornaments for the churches, but license to retire. Your majesty knows how much against my will I was placed in this chair. I displease even my friends on no other account than because I value nothing but God. I beseech you, make this my last petition, that among your trophies and triumphs you make this the greatest, that you bring the church to unity and concord."

The emperor and those about him were astonished at such a greatness of soul and he, with much difficulty, was prevailed upon to give his assent. This being obtained, Saint Gregory had no more to do than to take his leave of the whole city. He did so in a pathetic discourse, delivered in the metropolitan church before one hundred and fifty fathers of the council and an incredible multitude of the people. [24] He described the condition in which he had found that church on his first coming to it and that in which he left it. He gave to God his thanks and the honor of the reestablishment of the Catholic faith in that city. He made a solemn protestation of the disinterestedness of his own conduct during his late administration, not having touched any part of the revenues of the See of Constantinople the entire time. He reproached the city with the love of shows, luxury, and magnificence. He said he was accused of too great mildness and was also accused of a meanness of spirit because of the lowly appearance he made with respect to both dress and table. He vindicated his behavior in these regards, saying, "I did not take it to be any part of my duty to vie with consuls, generals, and governors, who know not how to employ their riches otherwise than in pomp and show. Neither did I imagine that the necessary subsistence of the poor was to be applied to the support of luxury, good cheer, a prancing horse, a sumptuous chariot, and a long train of attendants. If I have acted in another manner and have thereby given offense, the fault is already committed and cannot be recalled, but I hope is not unpardonable."

He concluded by bidding a moving farewell to his church (his dear Anastasia, which he called, in the language of Saint Paul, his glory and his crown); to the cathedral and all the other parishes of the city; to the holy apostles as honored in the magnificent church (in which Constantius had placed the relics of Saint Andrew, Saint Luke, and Saint Timothy); to the episcopal throne; to the clergy; to the holy monks and the other pious servants of God; to the emperor and all the court with its jealousies, pomp, and ambition; to the East and West divided in his cause; to the tutelar angels of his church; and to the sacred Trinity honored in that place. He concluded by saying, “My dear children, preserve the depositum of faith and remember the stones that have been thrown at me because I planted it in your hearts.”

The saint was most tenderly affected in abandoning his dear flock—his converts especially which he had gained at his first church of Anastasia, as they had already signalized themselves in his service by suffering persecutions with patience for his sake. They followed him weeping, and entreating him to abide with them. He was not insensitive to their tears, but motives of greater weight obliged him not to regard them on this occasion. Saint Gregory, seeing himself at liberty, rejoiced in his happiness, as he expressed himself some time after to a friend when he said, “What advantages have not I found in the jealousy of my enemies! They have delivered me from the fire of Sodom by drawing me from the dangers of the episcopal charge.”[25]

This treatment was the recompense with which men rewarded the labors and merit of a saint whom they ought to have sought in the remotest corners of the earth; but that city was not worthy to possess so great and holy a pastor. In that short time, he had brought over the chief part of its inhabitants to the Catholic faith, as appears from his works and from Saint Ambrose.[26] He had conquered the obstinacy of heretics by meekness and patience and thought it a sufficient revenge that he had it in his power to chastise them for their former persecutions.[27] He induced the Catholics to show the same moderation towards the heretics and exhorted those Catholics to serve Jesus Christ by taking a Christian revenge of them—by bearing their persecutions with patience and overcoming evil with good.[28] Besides establishing the purity of faith, he had begun a happy reformation of manners among the people and much greater fruits were to be expected from his zealous labors. Nectarius, who succeeded him, was a soft man, and by no means equal to such a charge. Before the election of Nectarius, Gregory left the city and returned to Nazianzum.

In his retirement, he composed the poem on his own life, particularly dwelling on what he had done at Constantinople to obviate the scandalous slanders that were published against him. He labored to place a bishop at Nazianzum, but was hindered by the opposition of many of the clergy. Sickness obliged him to withdraw soon after to Arianzum, probably before the end of the year 381. In his solitude, he testified [29] that

he regretted the absence of his friends, though he seemed insensible to everything else of this world. To punish himself for superfluous words (though he had never spoken to the disparagement of any neighbor), in 382, he passed the forty days of Lent in total silence. In his desert, he never refused spiritual advice to any that resorted to him for it.

In his parzenetic poem to Saint Olympias, he set excellent rules for the conduct of married women. Among other precepts, he said, “In the first place, honor God. Then respect your husband as the eye of your life, for he is to direct your conduct and actions. Love only him. Make him your joy and your comfort. Take care never to give him any occasion of offence or disgust. Yield to him in his anger. Comfort and assist him in his pains and afflictions, speaking to him with sweetness and tenderness and making him prudent and modest remonstrances at seasonable times. It is not by violence and strength that the keepers of lions endeavor to tame them when they see them enraged. Instead, they soothe and caress them, stroking them gently and speaking with a soft voice. Never let his weaknesses be the subject of your reproaches. It can never be just or allowable for you to treat a person in this manner whom you ought to prefer to the whole world.” He prayed that these holy women might become the mothers of many children and that there might be the more souls to sing the praises of Jesus Christ.[30]

He often repeated this important advice: that everyone begin and end every action by offering his heart and whatever he does to God by a short prayer [31] for we owe all that we are or have to God and He accepts and rewards the smallest action, not so much with a view to its importance as to the affection of the heart, which is able to give in return for God’s benefits and in acknowledgment of his sovereignty.

Saint Gregory had been obliged to govern the vacant see of Nazianzum after the death of his father, leaving the chief care of that church to Cledonius in his absence. However, in 382, he procured Eulalias to be ordained bishop of that city and spent the remainder of his life in retirement near Arianzum while continuing to aid that church with his advice, though at that time very old and infirm. In his private abode, he had a garden, a fountain, and a shady grove, in which he took much delight. Here, in company with certain solitaires, he lived estranged from pleasures and in the practice of bodily mortification—fasting, watching, and praying much on his knees. “I live,” said he, “among rocks and with wild beasts, never seeing any fire, or using shoes and having only one single garment.[32] I am the outcast and the scorn of men. I lie on straw, clad in sackcloth, and my floor is always moist with the tears I shed.”[33] In the decline of life, he set himself to write pious poems for the edification of such among the faithful as were fond of music and poetry. He had also mind to oppose the poems made use of by the Apollinarist heretics to propagate their errors by such as were orthodox, useful, and religious, as the priest Gregory said in his life. He considered this exercise also as a work of penance, compositions in meter being always more difficult than those in prose.

He therein recounted the history of his life and sufferings. He published his faults, his weaknesses, and his temptations, enlarging much more on these than on his great actions. He complained of the annoyance of his rebellious flesh, notwithstanding his great age, his ill state of health, and his austerities, acknowledging himself wholly indebted to the divine grace that had always preserved in him the treasure of virginity inviolable. God suffered him to feel these temptations that he might not be exposed to the snares of vanity and pride and that, whilst his soul dwelt in heaven, he might be put in mind by the rebellion of the body that he was still on earth in a state of war. His poems are full of cries of ardent love, by which he conjures Jesus Christ to assist him, without whose grace he declares we are only dead carcasses, exhaling the stench of sin, and as incapable of making one step as a bird is of flying without air or a fish of swimming without water for he alone makes us see, act, and run.[34] He joined great watchfulness to prayer, especially shunning the conversation and neighborhood of women,[35] over and above the assiduous maceration of his body.

In his letters, he gave the same advice to others, of which his own life was a constant example. One instance shall suffice. Sacerdos, a holy priest, was fallen into an unjust persecution through slander. Saint Gregory wrote to him thus in his third letter. “What evil can happen to us after all this? None, certainly, unless we by our own fault lose God and virtue. Let all other things fall out as it shall please God. He is the Master of our life and knows the reason of everything that befalls us. Let us only fear to do anything unworthy our piety. We have fed the poor; we have served our brethren; we have sung the psalms with cheerfulness. If we are no longer permitted to continue this, let us employ our devotion some other way. Grace is not barren and opens different ways to heaven. Let us live in retirement; let us occupy ourselves in contemplation; let us purify our souls by the light of God. This perhaps will be no less a sacrifice than anything we can do.”

These were Saint Gregory’s occupation from the time of his last retirement until his happy death in 389 or, according to others, 391. Tillemont gives him only sixty or sixty-one years of age, but he was certainly considerably older. The Latins honor him on the 8th of May. The Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus caused his ashes to be translated from Nazianzum to Constantinople and to be laid in the Church of the Apostles, which was done with great pomp in 950. They were brought to Rome in the crusades and lie under an altar in the Vatican Church.

This great saint looked upon the smiles and frowns of the world with indifference, because spiritual and heavenly goods wholly engrossed his soul.

“Let us never esteem worldly prosperity or adversity as things real or of any moment,” said he,[36] “but let us live elsewhere and raise all our attention to heaven, esteeming sin as the only true evil and nothing truly good but virtue, which unites us to God.”

Endnotes

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| 1 Naz. Or. 19, Carm. 2. | 19 Sozom. Lib vii. C.5. |
| 2 Or. 4, p. 121. | 20 Lib. ii. p. 191 |
| 3 Or. I p. 32. | 21 Socr. Lib. ii. c. 38 |
| 4 Carm. 2, p. 31. | 22 Carm I |
| 5 Carm. 55. | 23 Carm. I. |
| 6 Carm. I. | 24 Or. 32. |
| 7 Or. 29. | 25 Ep. 73. |
| 8 Carm. 55. | 26 L. de Spir. Sancto. |
| 9 Ep. 69. | 27 Or. 32. |
| 10 Carm. 49. | 28 Or. 24. |
| 11 Or. 9, 29. | 29 Ep. 73. |
| 12 Rufin. Hist. lib. ii. c. 9, p. 254 | 30 Quo plures celebrent magni praeconia reais. |
| 13 Or. 3, p. 53. | Nor. t. ii. p. 144. |
| 14 Or. 12. | 31 Or. I, p. 1; Or. 9, pp. 152-154, &c. |
| 15 Ep. 17. | 32 Carm. 5 and 60. |
| 16 Ep. 16. | 33 Ib. 147 |
| 17 His will was comprised in these words, | 34 Carm. 59. |
| “I bequeath my whole substance to the poor.” | 35 EP. 196, P. 894. |
| 18 Ep. 32. | 36 EP. 189. |
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Saint Gregory of Nazianzus by Francesco Bartolozzi (1727 ~ 1815) after Domenichino.

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